



The background features a collage of portraits of Chinese men, likely business leaders, in various attire including suits and traditional Chinese clothing. The top and bottom of the cover are decorated with large, stylized Chinese characters in a circular frame, rendered in a light blue and orange color scheme respectively.

CHINESE FAMILY BUSINESS

In Sarawak, Malaysia

Life Stories

TING SU HIE

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CHINESE FAMILY BUSINESS

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CHINESE FAMILY BUSINESS

In Sarawak, Malaysia

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TING SU HIE

Universiti Malaysia Sarawak
Kota Samarahan

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PREFACE

This book records the life stories of some founders and successors of Chinese family businesses in Sarawak, Malaysia. In most cases, it is a rags-to-riches story but the storyline is not as simplistic as that.

When I conducted the interviews to obtain the life stories of the founders and successors of these Chinese family businesses, their stories transported me back to a time when they paddled boats up and down the river amidst the danger of crocodiles, when they tapped rubber at wee hours in the morning, and when they borrowed money from family and friends to start their business. From these humble beginnings, their businesses have grown to its current stature, passing from their hands to those of their descendants.

This book speaks of the diligence, wisdom and foresight of the founders as well as their courage to take bold steps which propelled their business to greater heights. Although the book is not a how-to book on business strategies per se, the perceptive reader will be able to discern the strategies of the inimitable founders of Chinese family businesses.

This book presents unique narratives of different trajectories of growth for the Chinese family business. Many gems are contained within the book: unique stories of lives of founders which can be an inspiration for many; glimpses into the lives of public figures who are only human in their struggles and aspirations.

Effort has been made to include as many Chinese family businesses as possible in the book to put on record a heritage of Sarawak. However, this dream of mine could not be realised because some founders wished to maintain a low profile while access to others could not be obtained. I hope there can be a sequel because there are more life stories to be told.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

First of all, I would like to express my gratitude to family and friends who helped me to establish contact with the owners of the Chinese family businesses. My sincere appreciation goes to the owners and family of the Chinese family businesses for sharing their life stories with me. It is with a sense of awe that I entered the lives of the inimitable founders of the Chinese family businesses, if only for a few hours of interview and verification of the book drafts. I also thank the family and employees of the Chinese family businesses who later assisted me in checking drafts of the book chapters.

While every attempt has been made to ensure the accuracy of the narratives in this book, some facts may have taken on romanticised meanings with the passage of time, particularly when seen from an outsider perspective. Furthermore, there may have been new developments since the book chapters were finalised. I seek the grace of readers to overlook omissions and misrepresentations, if any. I hope that this book will be a tribute to the Chinese family business owners who have enriched the heritage of Sarawak by sharing their life stories.

The research underlying the production of this book was funded by the Fundamental Research Grant Scheme (FRGS) of the Ministry of Higher Education, FRGS/05(37)/845/2012(85), for a research on "Relative weight of language, family values and business factors leading to the success of family business conglomerates: The case of Sarawak". I would like to thank co-researcher Associate Professor Dr Evan Lau Poh Hock for his contribution in interviews with some family business owners.

Looking back, as I reread the book to check its contents for the last time, I am amazed at the interweaving of the Chinese family business owners' narratives, the body of knowledge on family businesses worldwide and my

thoughts. A long time has passed since I conducted the first interview on 1 April 2013. My struggles to write the book are finally over. For this, there is no one else to thank but God who makes all things possible for those who call on the name of His Son, Jesus Christ.

Associate Professor Dr Ting Su Hie

Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

More than 80% of businesses in the world, whether in Malaysia or elsewhere, are family owned. Many big names are family businesses such as Michelin, Hermes, Lego and Walmart. A family business is “a company mostly owned and managed by a single root family” (Brenes, Madrigal, & Requena, 2011, p. 280). In a family-owned business, ownership and control are interlinked. A family business is one in which both “ownership and policy making are dominated by members of an ‘emotional kinship group’” (Carsrud, 1994, p. 39). Usually many family members from multiple generations are involved in the family business, but at least one family member should be in a management position for it to be considered a family business (Shanker & Astrachan, 1996).

Family business is a unique business arrangement because family and business are intertwined. The business provides income and a means of living for the family, and the family gives loyal commitment and other valuable resources to the business. Employees work office hours but family members work round the clock. Their business is their life. At home, the dialogue on the business continues with immediate family and family-at-large, including aunts and grandmothers not directly involved in the business (Tokarczyk et al., 2007). In fact, the good communication among family has been identified as one of the success factors of family businesses (Malone, 1989). In the olden days, the business was operated downstairs and the family lived upstairs. Now we see a physical and geographical separation as businesses grow into conglomerates and offices are planted all over the world. However, with technological advances, the open channels of communication in family business can continue.

However, family businesses are beset by a particular problem that non-family owned firms do not encounter, that is, succession. Because of the intertwined ownership and management in family businesses, if instability arises

in any of the three entities that are at work (business, family and founder), intra-family conflicts happen and the survival of the family business is threatened (Morris et al., 1996). Successful family business succession requires adequate preparation of heirs for succession, positive relationship among family members, and informal planning and control activities within the family without relying on non-family members (Morris et al., 1996).

In the past, founders of family businesses can assume that their children will take over their business when they come of age. However, in the 21st century, this has become a presumption. Many family businesses experience a crisis of succession because the founder's descendants are not interested in taking over the family business and they cannot be instructed to do so, unlike what happened to descendants belonging to the Generation X (born between 1965 and 1984). The Generation Y, aged below mid-thirties, prefers to chart their own career paths outside of the family business and may not feel a personal commitment to the family business. Much as the founders of family businesses try to groom their next generation for succession, sometimes they have to face reality and employ professional managers to run the family business. Some family business owners who are more responsive to change see the employment of professional managers as a viable option (Craig & Lindsay, 2002; Khoo et al., 1993). They see the professional managers bringing in operational knowledge and skills that strengthen the family business but the founder's family still needs to be involved in the ownership and control of the business for it to remain as a family business.

The Chinese family businesses described in this book are particularly interesting because in most cases, there has been a move from agriculture to trading, almost as if this is a recipe for success in the earlier decades. Some of these founders of Chinese family business started off by tapping rubber and farming and their first dabble in trading took the form of selling fish, charcoal, chicken feed, groceries and other products needed by the timber and shipping industry. In later years, when the family business grew to huge proportions, these founders returned to agriculture – but on a large scale. Many made it big by investing in oil palm plantations, poultry rearing, fish rearing and prawn farming. It also seems that although the Chinese family businesses in Sarawak started out in different industries, their growth trajectories take them to the construction industry. This could be due to the nature of development of Sarawak, and the building and construction industry makes engineering one of the professions that is in high demand in the state.

The expansion of the Chinese family business into the upstream and downstream industries related to their original business is a diversification

from the nature of the original business. This also makes the Chinese family businesses in Sarawak more homogeneous over time in the industries in which they are involved in. The diversification approach taken by founders of the Chinese family business has an added advantage and it is particularly important considering that there may be lack of successors to sustain the continuity of the family business. The diversification approach allows their successors to develop in different paths and reduce intra-family conflict which threaten the continuity of their business.

The lives of the founders of the Chinese family business have also gone a full circle, figuratively speaking. They, or their fathers or grandfathers, came to Sarawak as immigrants from China to escape persecution and hardship, or merely in search of greener pastures. Their narratives tell of people who believed in them that gave them a much-needed break: family and friends who trusted them enough to lend them money to buy a piece of land, or to rent a shop lot; and teachers who paid their fees and sponsored their education. Their narratives also tell of parents who believed in their capabilities and entrusted the responsibility of providing for the family upon their shoulders, which left them little option but to rise up to the challenge. Not to be forgotten are spouses who toiled alongside them and took care of the family and children so that the founders of the Chinese family businesses could focus on the business. Some wives also worked in the business, taking charge of the accounts and other administrative work but some founders believed that spouses should not be involved in the business. The interesting twist is that after the founders of these Chinese family businesses have made it big, they return to China – not as in emigrating back to China. In their community work and charities, many of them return to their Chinese roots by giving generously towards Chinese education and Chinese associations, including clans. Some of the founders of the Chinese family business have gone a full circle in their business by trading with business partners in China or setting up branches in the land they or their forefathers immigrated from.

None of the founders of the Chinese family businesses included in this book had a university education. They were educated by the “market university”, a Foochow saying which means that they learn from life experience. What they lacked, they made sure their children do not. They sent all their children for their university education in English speaking countries, often in Australia, the United Kingdom and the United States. They believe that their children would acquire knowledge and expertise that can further the growth of their family business. The value placed on education is a reflection of the Chinese culture shared by Chinese diaspora in various parts of the

world (Fan, 2000). The rise in education levels from founder to successors of family business is not unique to the Sarawak setting. The increase in educational attainment of the successor generation has also been a trend in Finland and Europe (Italy, Spain and Britain) since the nineteenth century (Kansikas, 2015). One generation rises above the other in the livelihood. The founder generation was able to grab the opportunities and make it big. Can the successor generations compete in a changed environment where they have to create opportunities?

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Chapter 2

THE TEOCHEW COUSINS WHO ESTABLISHED CHOP SIM SWEE JOO - SIM SWEE KUN AND SIM SWEE TENG

The family business started with Sim Swee Kun and his cousin, Sim Swee Teng, and their fourth generation is running the business now. They started with a shop called "Swee Kee" and their shipping business has been known by the name of "Sim Swee Joo Trading" and "Sim Swee Joo Berhad".

Sim Swee Kun and his move to Nanyang

Sim Swee Kun was born in 1898 in Swa Mui, Swatou, Teochew, China. The people living in the area were all "Sim". There, they made gold paper for ancestor worship; the thin gold paper was glued onto paper money.

In 1923, Sim Swee Kun was in his twenties when he sailed from Kuching to Kidurong, the name for Bintulu then. It was literally a sailboat and the journey by sea took one month. He came with his first wife, Tan Hun Teng, who died a few years after living in Sarawak. His grandchildren cannot recall the exact year, but it was either 1936 or 1937 and she was 33 years old then.

He later married Yeo Poh Chay – it was an arranged marriage and he had not met her until she stepped foot in Bintulu. Yeo Poh Chay was the one who brought his four grandchildren on the long journey from Swa Mui to Bintulu. The eldest was his granddaughter by the name of Sim Mong Mui.

She recalls the Sim family celebration on July 15, 1950. On July 26, the China Red Army came to their village. They hid themselves in an undisclosed location. After three days, the sound of planes overhead ceased and the children asked to go back to their home. Their mother, Sim Swee Kun's wife, said a firm "no" because if they did, they would not want to leave and their lives might be in danger. Those were the conditions that prompted them to leave Swa Mui for Nanyang, the name by which Sarawak was known in those days.

Ten of them squeezed into a small boat and set off for Singapore: Sim Swee Kun's wife (Yeo Poh Chay), daughter (Sim Cho Chen), his daughter-in-law (Tan Jiu Kheng, wife of Sim Phang How), his four grandchildren, an uncle (Sim Phang Hee), one relative and a friend's wife. Sim Phang Hee's wife (Tay Chey Kheng) came to Sarawak one year later. Sim Swee Kun's grandchildren were very young when they made the sea journey. His granddaughters, Sim Mong Mui and Sim Mong Joo, were ten and eight respectively. His grandson Sim Mong Ping was five and Sim Mong Teck was only six months old.

The journey also involved a transfer from a small boat to a bigger boat in the middle of the sea. The adults used the rope ladder let down at the side of the boat at a gradient but the kids were pulled up by their hand. If they slipped, they would fall into the sea. Life jackets were not known then.

After one week at sea, they arrived in Singapore, the transit point, only to be quarantined for another three days. Looking at Sentosa Island today, one would not be able to fathom the description of the place as a pig sty. They slept on the floor. They lined up like beggars with a plate in their hand to get food for their meals. They were vaccinated before they were allowed to go onshore at Nang Hua Kek Jan, an inn. Sim Swee Kun's daughter-in-law's face was swollen and they were quarantined for another two weeks before they were allowed to continue their journey to Kuching. They continued their journey to Bintulu in a wooden boat called "Swee Hong" The boat was small and the oil fumes were overpowering.

Sailing up the river in Bintulu

Bintulu was so small then. They went ashore on a plank walk – the gaps in between the wooden planks made it difficult to walk. Then Sim Swee Kun took the motley group in his boat to bring them upriver to where he lived. There was not even a car in sight and the road was a dirt road. The Hung Lung was a house on stilts with engravings on the wooden pillars. Beneath it, chickens and ducks were pecking for food everywhere.

There were holes in the walls made by bullets from the Japanese soldiers. It was dismal compared to their comfortable house in China, which was made of cement and new. The grandchildren learnt to adjust to life and went to school every day in a motorboat.



Photograph 2.1. "Swee", the first boat owned by Sim Swee Joo (沈瑞裕)

Sago mill

Sim Swee Kun owned a shop by the name of Chop Swee Joo which dealt with sago. His wife and his sons (Phang How and Phang Hee) worked in their sago mill. Further upstream, the Malay villagers cut the sago logs into half, scrapped out the flour, and washed them clean. The residue was fed to the chickens and ducks. The sago flour was transported to the sago mill by boat. There, they washed it again and dried it in the sun on grass mats. Whenever it was about to rain, there was a mad rush to fold up the grass mats to prevent the rain from soaking them. The sago flour was sold to Singapore and there was a demand for sago biscuits then.

There were three sago mills in Bintulu at that time. Besides processing the sago, Sim Swee Kun also bought local produce from the local people nearby. One of these was the rubber sheets. They employed workers to wash the rubber sheets clean. The clean sheets were put into a room to smoke for a week until they were dry. Then they were cooled for one to two days. Otherwise they would stick together. The rubber sheets also made their way to Singapore.

Jungle produce

In addition, they also traded engkabang (ellipeanut) and bits of latex that dried on the rubber trees after they were tapped. The timbers that were traded were jelutong (pale lightweight timber), belian (hard wood) and remin (soft wood). The jelutong sap was also processed for export as the raw material to make chewing gum.

Sim Phang Hee remembers that the Swee Joo shop also sold the engkabang to a relative, Seng Tee. Chong Chek was another relative who is close to him, and also dealt in these jungle products and sold rubber (or tree sap/gum). He told them about someone in Liverpool who was interested to buy the jungle products, and his friend acted as an agent.

Even in those days, the rubber sheets sold to Singapore had the Sim Swee Joo brand on it. The name was printed on small white strips of cloth. Sim Mong Mui, the eldest granddaughter of Sim Swee Kun, was one of those who cut a slit in the strips and put the other end of the cloth through the slit to tag the rubber sheets.

Sim Family Tree

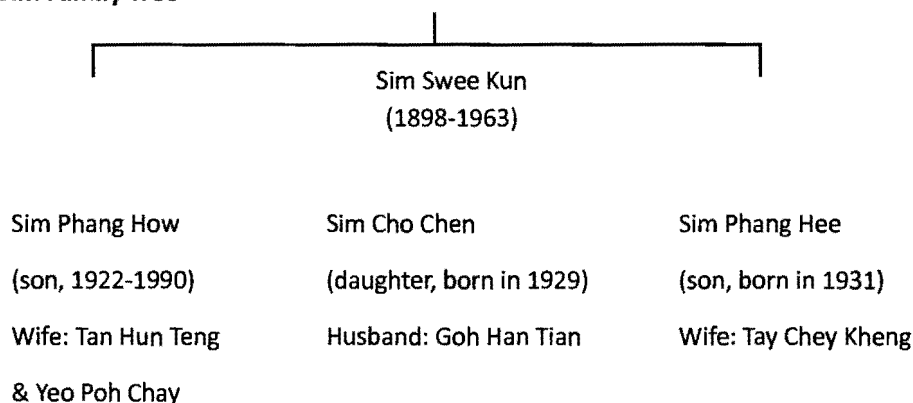


Figure 2.1. Children of Sim Swee Kun

The Sim Swee Joo family business we know today was passed on from Sim Swee Kun to his children (Figure 2.1). Their daughter, Sim Cho Chen, operated a grocery store by the name of Heng Kee in Kuching, with her husband, Goh Han Tian who was a teacher and a salesperson before finally opening his grocery store.

The two sons, Sim Phang How and Sim Phang Hee, were involved in the family business. Sim Phang How's wife, Tan Hun Teng, passed away when their children were still young, and he married Yeo Poh Chay who did not have any children of her own.

The family trees of these three families and the involvement of Sim Swee Kun's grandchildren and great grandchildren in the family business are shown in Tables 2.1, 2.2 and 2.3. As the business grew, the younger children were brought into the business to help out.

Most of his children and grandchildren had their primary education in Bintulu before furthering their secondary education in Chung Hua school in Bintulu. Sim Phang Hee studied in St Joseph's school in Kuching where he learnt English. Because school cost money and he needed to earn a living, after six months he returned to Bintulu to work in his father's shop. Sim Phang How had his education in China.



Photograph 2.2. From left: Author Ting Su Hie, her husband Edmund Sim Ui Hang, Sim Phang Hee, Sim Mong Hong (his eldest son)

Table 2.1. Sim Phang How and Tan Jiu Kheng's children and grandchildren

Order in the family	Name	Gender	Year of birth	Details	Number of children
1	Sim Mong Mui	Female	1940	After STTC teacher training, she taught in Tatau and later in Sekolah Rendah Chung Hua until retirement. She did accounts in Swee Joo Trading at one point.	2 sons: Tong Kee is taking care of accounts in Swee Joo and Tong Siang is taking care of another construction business
2	Sim Mong Joo	Female	1942	She helped mother to look after the family before marriage .	5 children: 3 daughters and 2 sons doing their own business
3	Sim Mong Ping	Male	1945	Now a director in Swee Joo Trading.	4 children: 1 daughter is living in the United States and another is helping her father in the business. His 2 sons were previously in Swee Joo Trading but have since ventured into their own logistics business
4	Sim Mong Teck	Male	1950	He worked in the family business after his Taiwan degree. He passed away in 1977 due to sickness.	2 children: the daughter is a medical doctor in Singapore and the son was in the Swee Joo Trading but have since ventured into his own business
5	Sim Mong Hua	Male	1952	He was Captain of Sim Swee Joo boat and later worked in the Swee Joo shop.	4 sons who used to be in Swee Joo Trading but now run their own business
6	Sim Mong Hui	Female	1954	She helps out in her husband's business.	5 children: 2 daughters and 3 sons who have their own business

7	Sim Mong Kia	Male	1955	He supervises the Swee Joo wharf.	5 children: 2 daughters and 3 sons who have their own business
8	Goh Mong Lee	Female	1957	She was adopted by her aunt and not involved in the Swee Joo family business. She is married to David Lai who runs his own business.	3 sons who have their own business
9	Sim Mong Yang	Female	1958	She managed the petrol station before she married. Now she lives in Miri and Australia.	5 children: 3 daughters and 2 sons who have their own business
10	Sim Mong Eng	Female	1961	She manages accounts at Swee Joo Trading. Her husband works in BDA.	2 children: 1 daughter who once worked in Swee Joo Trading and 1 son who is still in secondary school
11	Sim Mong Tai	Male	1963	He takes charge of Swee Joo wharf.	3 children: 1 daughter who is still studying and 1 son who was in Swee Joo Trading but have since ventured into his own business
12	Sim Mong Ngin	Female	1964	She works in Swee Joo Trading after her New Zealand degree.	3 children: 2 daughters and 1 son are still studying